

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

AUG 2023 | EPHESIANS 6:10-20

All the players in the story up until now have done their part. It is our time to show up, stand up, and speak up.

NOW WHAT?

The Bible is a metanarrative from creation to new creation. It began in a garden with humans walking and working with God. It ends in a garden with humans walking and working with God. It is a long story about God keeping His promise to crush the head of the devil through the instrumentality of humanity. But how does that affect us now? It is exhilarating to read or hear how God has worked in every generation to bring about the climax of the story with Jesus being crucified, resurrected, and exalted. It is an amazing story. It is the story that is the origin of all stories. It has so many interesting twists and turns. We are astounded that God can somehow maintain His sovereign control over all things, yet grant to His human creations an agency that makes them responsible for their choices while they engage in work that will have eternal influence. But where are we in the story?

Let's summarize. God promised that the seed of woman would crush the head of the serpent. This all came to pass when Jesus became a man and defeated the deceiver by taking upon Himself the sin that gave the devil leverage. When Jesus died, sin was condemned and no longer a tool in the hands of a vicious accuser. Then Jesus defeated death, taking away the threat the devil had used to intimidate humans since the Garden. He then sat down at the right hand of the Father as Lord over all. As Lord, He sent the Holy Spirit to live inside His redeemed humans to enforce the victory He had won over all the forces of evil. That is our cue.

Since the early days of the church, believers have tried to figure out how to live in victory over a defeated foe while the foe is still around. Some have tried a form of triumphalism that sought to rule over the world

with superior knowledge, political power, and even military might. But that always seemed odd since Jesus, who is the model human on earth, didn't do it that way. Some have concluded that since Jesus defeated the devil, we can forget about his activity. It can be filed under obsolete concepts. They contend that we have moved beyond such primitive explanations of human conflict and interaction. Some others have become so enamored with the ideas of the invisible world of darkness that lurks behind every institution, they forget that the issue is the victory of Jesus. Perhaps it is time to look again at Paul's instructions regarding life between Pentecost and the final appearance of Jesus in the new creation. All the players in the story up until now have done their part. It is our time to show up, stand up, and speak up.

Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is so full of the story. He opens the curtain to reveal what has been happening in the invisible world all along. Jesus has been blessed in the invisible world with all the blessings ever promised to human covenant keepers. It has been the plan to unite all things in the invisible world with the visible world (see Ephesians 1:10). He prays that the eyes of believers will be open to the realities of the invisible world, making them contributors to the mission on earth. He tells us that we at one time were all under the control of the forces that control the world (Ephesians 2:1-3). He describes how when Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, we were raised in Him (Ephesians 2:5-7). He explains the mystery of how God through His church will reveal His manifold wisdom to rulers and authorities in heavenly places (Ephesians 3:9-13). As he ap-

proaches the end of the letter, Paul describes our role in terms of warfare. It is no surprise. The battle was on when Adam and Eve were in the garden. If God is restoring His original plan, He will use humans to enforce the ramifications of the battle He has already won.

Too many believers have interpreted our time on earth as a vacation with lots of comfort, convenience, and ease. We can easily begin to expect our rights to be respected and our wants to be satisfied. It is true that we are true sons of God with all the privileges that come with that. We are very rich, being joint heirs with Jesus who inherits everything God has. But we are called to be His representatives in war. We can't afford to deny its existence. Multitudes have fallen in battle simply because they didn't know there was a battle going on. Look at Paul's battle instructions:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up

the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Ephesians 6:10-20

In the text we can find four important truths to guide us in our role as spiritual soldiers. First, there is a reminder of what a battle looks like when God is in charge. Second, there is a clear description of the nature of the foe. Third, there is the geography of the battlefield. Fourth there is the power with which we must fight.

First, as we read this text we are reminded of the battle between Israel and Philistia. As the armies pulled up to the battlefield, Goliath from Philistia challenged Israel to send out a representative to fight him. It would be one against one with the winner getting the full victory. Israel was intimidated by this giant. He was big, strong, and had weapons that no one could match. When young David came to the battlefield to check on his brothers, he was appalled that Goliath was allowed to mock the army of God. He volunteered to be God's representative to fight him. Saul encouraged him to borrow his armor. But David went out armed with the name of his God:

All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a fire among thorns; in the name of the Lord, I cut them off! I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

Psalms 118:10-14 ESV

The story is familiar. The little guy with the big name of God defeats the champion of the foe. Then the Israeli army chases their army and gathers the spoils. Look how Paul mirrors this story. Our Champion met one on one with the best that hell could muster. Though the evil one bruised His heel, the head of the enemy was crushed. We are like the Israeli soldiers. In light of our Champion's victory, we are moving through the land claiming what the blood of Jesus purchased, knowing that He will finally get His full money's worth. There will be full restoration. All wrongs will be made right. All sadness becomes a forgotten memory. Until then we are in the army.

Second, we are told that we aren't fighting people. The battle is behind the scenes. We fight against the forces of deception and destruction that motivate and activate people, but we never win by eliminating people. There are ideologies, theories, philosophies, and schemes offering another perspective on reality. Those didn't originate with humans. They came from the mouth of the Serpent's

seed. We cut them off by replacing them with the truth that is found only in Jesus. It has been said that ideas have consequences, and bad ideas kill people. When truth has been abandoned, the only thing left is deception that ultimately leads to death - whether of a person, a nation, or a world. The tricky part of our battle, however, is that we fight by standing in the winner's circle. We are not fighting one on one with Satan. Jesus alone took that battle. We are being bombarded by the fiery darts of accusation, slander, and hopelessness. We hear the desperate threat of the enemy denying his own defeat. He still maintains that we are guilty before the law, hounded by death, and sure to face a judgment we can't endure. We stay in the battle by refusing to believe such thoughts and rehearsing the truth that our salvation has been accomplished by the ruling Lord of the universe, is being administered by the same Spirit that raised Jesus from death, and is guaranteed by a Father who has made us His eternal sons with unconditional love.

Third, we see that once we get all dressed up in Jesus, we go forth with the sword of the Spirit to pray. That might not seem too adventurous. Just pray? But, when we are armed with the Spirit who is wielding the sword which is the word of God, we are dangerous beyond imagination. Paul began by saying that we don't do this in our own strength. We fight in the power of His might. Those who presumptuously have taken on the forces of evil in their own strength lie bloodied and bruised along the way. I know that the situation is alarming. The temptation is to panic and run out shooting and shouting. But the

Spirit is the one guiding this fight, and His weapon of choice is the word of God. And it is wielded first in prayer and then in speech.

Fourth, we are exhorted that this is a fight we could never win, a fight that has already been decided, a fight that gives us benefits we could never earn, and we are co-warriors with the Spirit who is constantly revealing the truths in the gospel, the word of God, that defang the roaring lion and stymie the strategies of hell. There is never a place for human arrogance in this battle. We are simply showing up in our own prescribed garden, standing up in our alien righteousness, and speaking up according to the promptings of the Spirit who is committed to implementing the full victory won by Jesus. Note that Paul saw the reason for standing was for the word to be preached, and he wanted to be sure that the right words were in his mouth. He knew that God's word doesn't return empty-handed. It just needs a chance to be spoken and heard.

I dare say that Hell fears nothing more than a Christian dressed up in the armor of Jesus, alert to what the Spirit is saying, and willing to speak up when the time is presented. That is a dangerous person to the forces of evil. The stage is set. The curtain is up. The lights are on. It is our time. Stand! Having done all, stand! Our Champion has won, and the forces of darkness are on the run.

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